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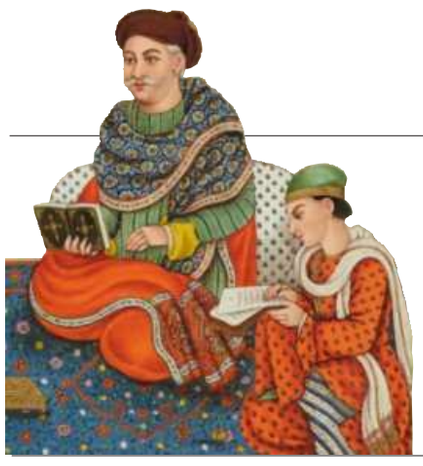

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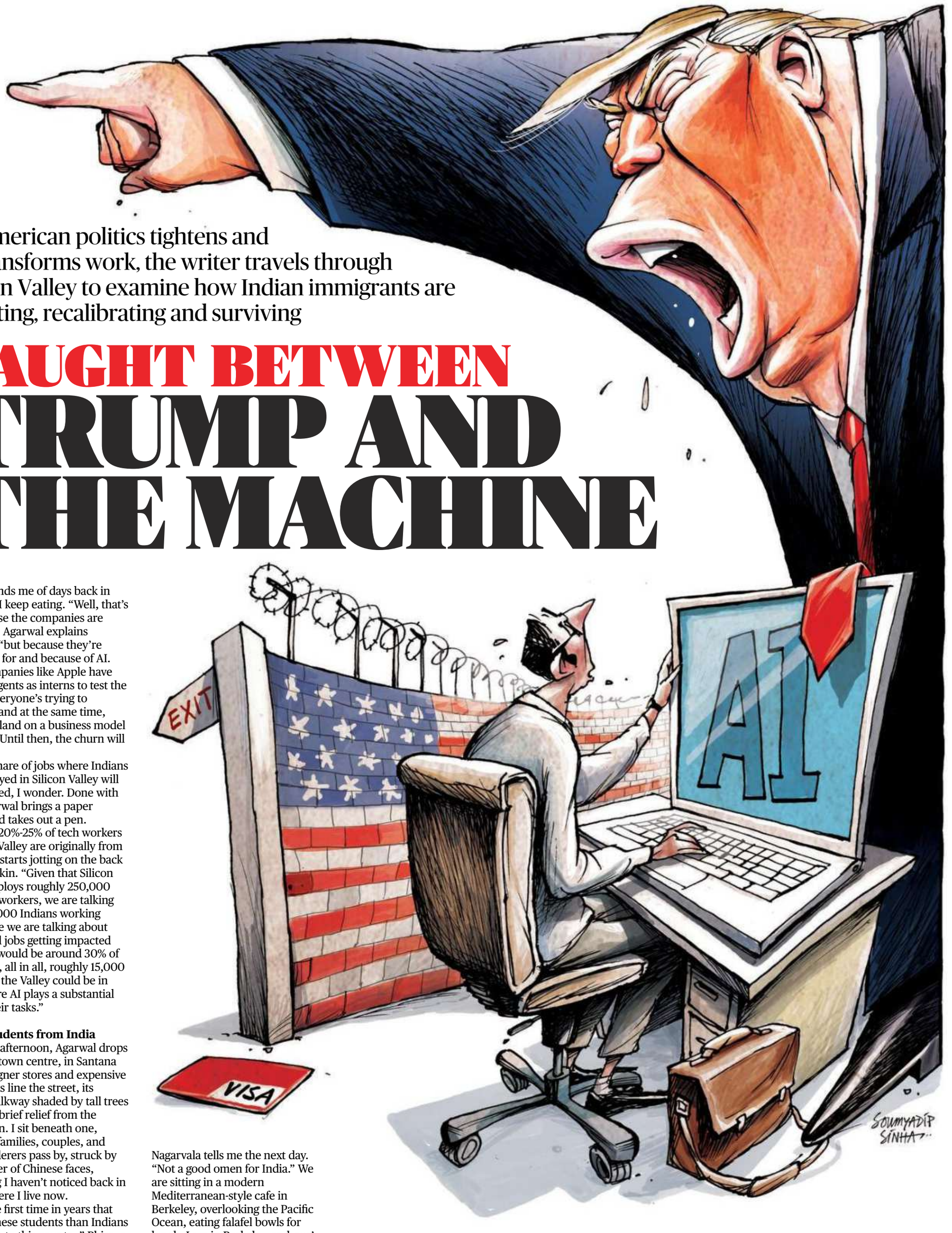

As American politics tightens and AI transforms work, the writer travels through Silicon Valley to examine how Indian immigrants are adapting, recalibrating and surviving

CAUGHT BETWEEN TRUMP AND THE MACHINE

Nitin Chaudhary

Nishant Agarwal picks me up from my hotel in San Jose on a crisp Tuesday morning. He wants to take me to a new South Indian restaurant called Mylapore that has become the talk of the town. I ask him what makes it so popular, given the number of Indian restaurants already dotting the Valley. Agarwal, a 40-something acquaintance who I'd met through overlapping circles in Silicon Valley, thinks for a moment before answering: "The food is really authentic, so much so that on weekends, there's a queue outside."

As we drive to Pleasanton where the restaurant is located, Agarwal mentions, almost in passing, that he works at ByteDance, the Chinese company that owns TikTok.

"Even in these times," I exclaim, becoming self-conscious almost instantly. Tariffs, layoffs, politics, trade barriers, bans, EVs – there are heaps of touchy topics in the U.S. these days, and I keep reminding myself to pause, to self-censor, to choose my curiosity carefully.

Agarwal senses my discomfort. "At this time, it's okay," he says. "Let's see how it goes with 'the Trump'."

It has been almost a year since Donald Trump's return to power as President of the United States, and the aftershocks are no longer abstract. Visa rules are tightening again, H-1B fees have crept up, and renewals are taking longer. Even seasoned engineers speak in lowered voices about travel, paperwork, and whether a job change is worth the risk.

I have come to Silicon Valley to unfurl, for myself, the chaos born of a cocktail of divisive politics and the unconstrained AI revolution. I have only recently moved to the U.S., crossing not just geographies but professional worlds, leaving behind the predictability of Europe for a country in mid-argument with itself. On one side are tightening borders, and polarising factions; on the other, an AI boom so unconstrained that it seems to race ahead of regulation. I want to see how these forces co-exist in the place where they collide most visibly. That question has brought me to the Valley.

Losing entry level jobs to AI

I had landed in San Francisco earlier that day and taken the Caltrain down to San Jose to meet Agarwal. The line will eventually be electrified, even reimagined for high-speed travel. For now, it chugs gently, making its way through Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Cupertino – names synonymous with Apple, AMD, Adobe, Intel, Meta, and Stanford University.

From the upper deck, I look around. The carriage is filled with people bent over MacBooks. Some are young, campus-bound perhaps. Others have greying hair. What unifies them is a quiet uniform: jeans, sneakers, hoodies, AirPods in, iced lattes within reach.

Outside, it is warm and sunny. Not far away, rocky hills seize the horizon, their steely greys contrasting with the light, shiny blue of the Californian sky. It looks idyllic, a place to walk, to think, to wonder, to create. Later, as Agarwal drives me through this landscape, I ask him how serious the tech layoffs are, the ones everyone seems to be worried about. "They're real," he tells me. "Every day, hundreds are losing their jobs. Entry-level jobs have completely disappeared. It's not a good time to come study in the U.S."

"Why so?" I wonder aloud, as we sit at Mylapore, eating ghee podi idlis dipped in spicy sambar. It is too heavy a meal for a light morning, but I am hungry, and the food reminds me of days back in India. So, I keep eating. "Well, that's not because the companies are suffering," Agarwal explains patiently, "but because they're pivoting – for and because of AI. Some companies like Apple have hired AI agents as interns to test the waters. Everyone's trying to optimise, and at the same time, hoping to land on a business model that pays. Until then, the churn will continue."

What share of jobs where Indians are employed in Silicon Valley will be impacted, I wonder. Done with food, Agarwal brings a paper napkin and takes out a pen. "Roughly 20%-25% of tech workers in Silicon Valley are originally from India," he starts jotting on the back of the napkin. "Given that Silicon Valley employs roughly 250,000 high-tech workers, we are talking about 50,000 Indians working here. Since we are talking about entry-level jobs getting impacted first, that would be around 30% of the lot. So, all in all, roughly 15,000 Indians in the Valley could be in roles where AI plays a substantial part of their tasks."

Fewer students from India

Later that afternoon, Agarwal drops me at the town centre, in Santana Row. Designer stores and expensive restaurants line the street, its central walkway shaded by tall trees offering a brief relief from the blazing sun. I sit beneath one, watching families, couples, and lone wanderers pass by, struck by the number of Chinese faces, something I haven't noticed back in Texas, where I live now.

"It's the first time in years that more Chinese students than Indians have come to this country," Phiroze Nagarvala tells me the next day. "Not a good omen for India." We are sitting in a modern Mediterranean-style cafe in Berkeley, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, eating falafel bowls for lunch. I am in Berkeley, an hour's drive from San Jose, to meet Nagarvala, a Parsi who came here as a student from Bombay in 1961 ("when it was still Bombay," he reminds me). He has taught mechanical engineering at UC Berkeley and worked at Berkeley National Labs in the hills overlooking the campus. He has a good pulse on the student cosmos.

Universities in the U.S. are like periscopes – what happens there remains hidden from usual sight but often marks future shifts. Has Trump's return changed how universities accept foreign students, I ask. "Possibly. But if they don't accept students from India or China, who else will study the sciences?" he replies with a grin. "The difference," Nagarvala continues, "is that Indians come to stay, while the Chinese tend to go back. They have to care for their parents, and being single children, they bear that responsibility more than us Indians. Any policy Trump dreams up should factor that in."

Some of the effects of recent policy changes are already visible. As of November 2025, the number of newly enrolled international students at U.S. universities has dropped by 17% following new restrictions on student visas. Among the universities already seeing fewer international students, the reasons are no longer mysterious. Nearly all (96%) point to visa application anxieties, while more than two-thirds cite travel restrictions. The figures come from the Institute of International Education, which has surveyed 825 U.S. colleges and universities. Most institutions report that the drop is sharpest among Indian students, enough to drag down the national numbers on its own.

Nagarvala and I finish our bowls and step into a European-style neighbourhood of pastel buildings, curated boutiques, and artisanal calm. Between the streets, the sea peaks through. Surfers in dark wetsuits bob on their boards, and far across the bay, San Francisco's skyline shimmers in the heat haze. We wander over to a Tesla store, outside which a small crowd has gathered in protest.

'Musk Is Murdering Our Democracy,' one placard reads. 'Don't Buy CyberTrucks! It Killed Three Children,' says another.

The protesters are all white. I don't see a single Indian or Chinese face among them.

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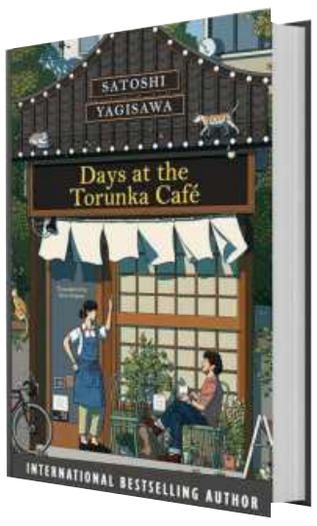
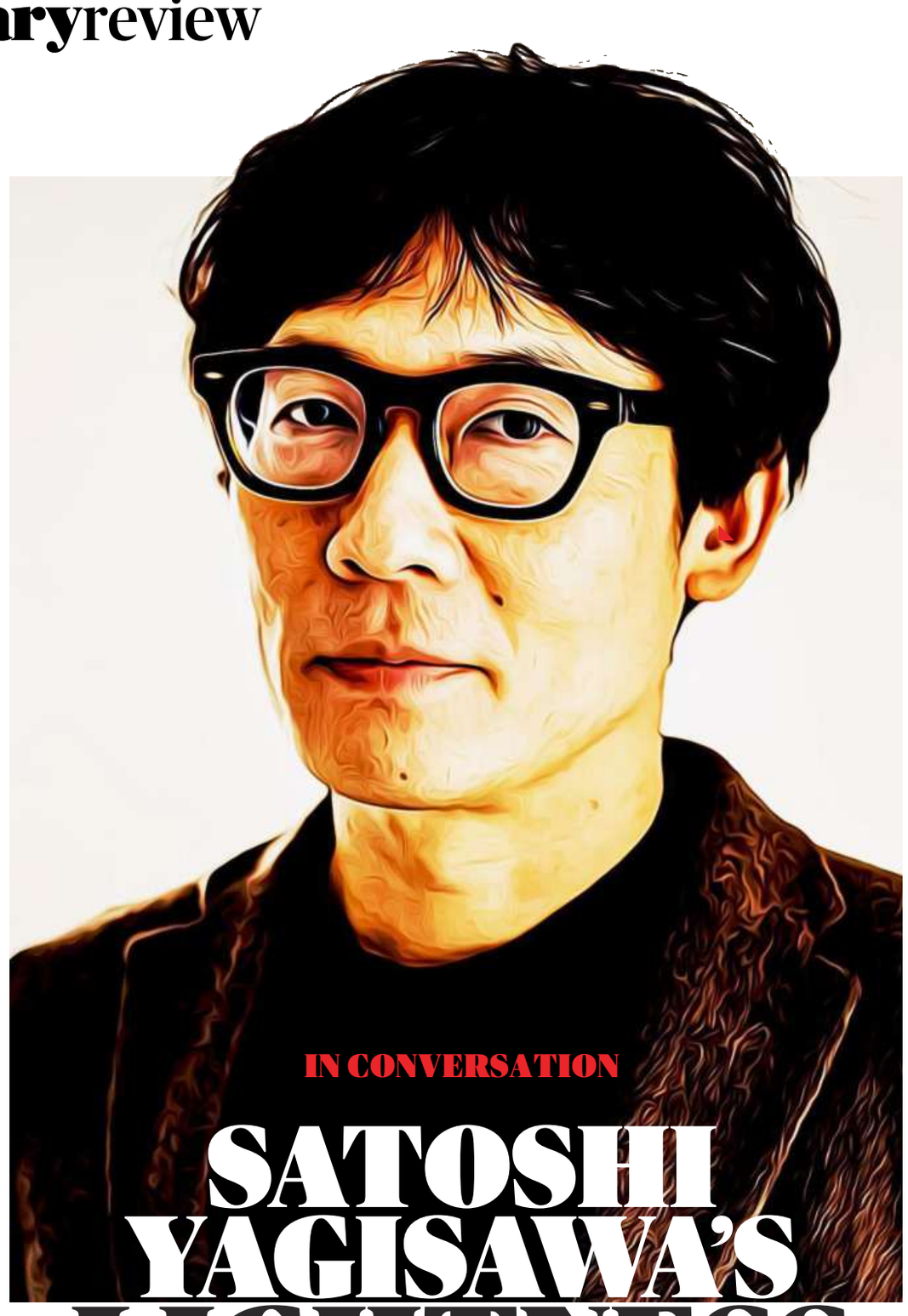
Dream unravels

In 2025, there were 5.7% fewer Indian students abroad (1.2 million) compared to 2024 (1.33 million) [according to the Ministry of External Affairs]. In the first half of 2025, F-1 visas to Indian students dropped by 44%. Chinese visa issuances fell by 24%. In contrast, the number of Vietnamese students receiving F-1 visas jumped by 20%.

Source: *ICEF Monitor*





IN CONVERSATION

SATOSHI YAGISAWA'S LIGHTNESS OF BEING

The Japanese author on portraying heavy themes delicately and finding salvation in the works of great writers from the past

Saurabh Sharma

Satoshi Yagisawa, the bestselling author of *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* (2023), which won the Chiyoda Literature Prize, and its sequel *More Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* (2024), sets his stories in a bibliophile's dream – a bookstore. His characters, inadvertently or not, find themselves drawn to the power of storytelling in the face of events – a heartbreak, a career change, or simply a new adventure. In his latest, *Days at the Torunka Café* (Manilla Press), translated by Eric Ozawa, Yagisawa offers up a gentle slice-of-life novel set in a cosy café that becomes a refuge and source of comfort for the characters. Ahead of *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai on January 17-18, the author discusses his writing process and readerly influences. Edited excerpts:

Question: *In the two-part* Morisaki Bookshop *series, it feels like you are paying homage to the authors who have inspired you or shaped your life. Could you tell us more?*

Answer: I deeply love modern Japanese literature, and my life as a reader has been profoundly shaped by it. The fact that Morisaki Bookshop specialises in antiquarian books of modern literature comes from this affection.

What struck me most when reading the works of great writers from the past was the realisation that no matter how much times and circumstances change, the essence of human emotions – the worries and pain people carry – remains constant. The heartache I was experiencing in my own life was vividly portrayed in the words of people who had lived decades before me. This discovery was a great salvation for me. That is why, when writing my own novels, I came to strongly desire to depict universal human emotions that transcend any particular culture or era.

Q: *While there are heavy-duty themes in your novels – rejection, grief, love, sexuality, taking control of oneself – they are manoeuvred carefully, with lightness. How do you achieve this without compromising on readability?*

A: I'm truly happy that you read it that way! This is precisely the aspect I put the most care into when writing. If I simply portray heavy themes in a heavy manner, readers might close the door before those themes even reach their hearts. 'How to conceal life's weight within lightness?' – this requires an extremely delicate sense of balance and technical effort to achieve as a story. I always hope to create works where readers can move through the story comfortably, yet when they pause for a moment, a deep resonance or question lingers in their hearts.

Q: *Be it the* Morisaki Bookshop *series or the first instalment of* Torunka Café, *the setting is a closed space encapsulating the world. Could you reflect on the purposefulness of this choice?*

A: I think this reflects my stance as a writer – my desire to be an 'observer'. Setting the stage in 'closed spaces' like bookshops or cafés is like installing a fixed camera. By anchoring the location, the changes in the people who visit, and the movements of their hearts emerge more vividly. Moreover, such places serve as "safe zones" where people are temporarily freed from their social titles and roles. It's precisely because these spaces are enclosed that people can remove their armour and return to their honest selves.

Q: *How has it been partnering with Eric Ozawa who has translated all your books?*

A: Regarding translation, I never give Eric any instructions or requests whatsoever. That said, the fact that my work has been read by so many people in the English-speaking world is undoubtedly thanks to his excellent translations. Personally, I also very much like him as a person, and I can only feel grateful to have been blessed with such a wonderful partner.

Q: *Given the recent popularity of Japanese fiction, is there anything readers should do to avoid ignoring the wealth of Japanese literature out there?*

A: Society, if left unchecked, will impose upon us "what we should do" and "what we should read". That is why I hope readers will cultivate the power to trust their own antennae. There is no need to be swayed by the voices of the world. What matters is simply this: whether your heart is moved, whether your life becomes richer.

The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and culture critic.

Satoshi Yagisawa will be at *The Hindu* Lit for Life (January 17-18) in Chennai. **Scan the QR code to register**

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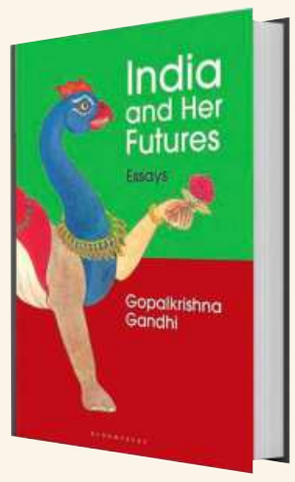
Moral clarity

In his essays, Gopalkrishna Gandhi continues his ethical and intellectual enquiry about India's past, present and future

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

To study the past, says Confucius, is to divine the future. The moral historian Gopalkrishna Gandhi does precisely this in *India and Her Futures*, essays across nearly four decades of public writing – not as prophecy or nostalgia, but as sustained ethical and intellectual inquiry. In a reflective cadence, these essays combine historical reach with introspection. While not rejecting the immediate, they remind the reader that moral clarity takes time.

Many of the most memorable moments in the book come when history is allowed to speak through remembered encounters and their simple retellings, rather than grand pronouncements. One early piece contains a remarkable exchange with Indian birdman Salim Ali in 1987. Ali describes his first meeting with Gandhi. It was 1917. Gandhi had just returned from South Africa. Ali's brother Hamid was an Assistant Collector. The village patel had been charged with some case of disloyalty or sedition, and Gandhi had come to speak in his defence. What impressed Ali most was "his unassuming simplicity and his humour."



India and Her Futures: Essays by Gopalkrishna Gandhi
Bloomsbury
₹899

Another highlight is a long essay on 'Badshah' Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as 'Frontier Gandhi' – the great Pathan leader from the North West Frontier Province. It quotes an incident described by Nehru in his autobiography showing moral solidarity forged in struggle. It was 1932. Nehru was in Dehradun jail. He writes, "In the heat of a summer afternoon I dozed off, and I remember having a curious dream. Abdul Ghaffar Khan was being attacked on all sides and I was fighting to defend him. I woke up... my pillow was wet with tears."

Commitment to service

The essays contain telling glimpses of iconic figures: the Gandhian Acharya Kripalani, who noted, "As human creations, I consider all governments to be imperfect, only some less so than others;" Dadabhai Naoroji, elected to the House of Commons in 1892; and M.S. Swaminathan and the Pugwash Conference on Science and Technology. What unites these figures is their commitment to service and their stubborn willingness to work for change, even through contingent and imperfect institutions.

Gandhi is equally attentive to lives that history has nearly forgotten. Such as Kamla Chowdhry, who studied in Tagore's Santiniketan with Mrinalini Swaminathan (later Sarabhai). After Kamla's civil servant husband was murdered, she continued her studies, completing a Ph.D at Michigan. With Vikram Sarabhai's support, she set up and effectively ran the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad for the first few years – though institutional sexism ensured that she was never made director.

These essays add the telling details that make up a life: such as the popularity of 'MS Blue,' the aquamarine of M.S. Subbulakshmi's Kanjeevaram sarees; or Landour-based writer Ruskin Bond's dry reply when asked about the supernatural: "I don't believe in ghosts. But I see them all the time." Such details are not ornamental. They reveal Gopal Gandhi's feeling for the texture of cultural life. The prose sparkles with philosophical wisdom – such as the "dukkha" that the Buddha counsels about; the "karuna dhara" of Rabindranath Tagore; the "kshurasya dhara" (razor's edge) described in the Kathopanishad; and the "mrigasirsha" star, named for the deer that bows its head at the advent of the first rains. Most important, the principle of duty, "Om krato smara kritam smara," from the Isha Upanishad: "The work alone is to be remembered, the work alone."

Poetic philosophy

Philosophy coexists with poetry in these essays, such as William Blake's sharply anguished image of the hunt in *Auguries of Innocence*: "Each outcry of the hunted hare/A fibre from the brain does tear"; Rumi's image of the journey: "It has been said, first the Comrade,/Then the way"; and Vikram Seth's sublime one-line autobiography: "I am so lonely, so content." Incidentally, Gopal Gandhi's essay on Seth notes that the poet's first book of poems, *Mappings* (1980), had been published by the remarkable publisher P. Lal from Calcutta, who had launched the work of so many Indian writers in English. He also reminds us that in the City of Joy, poetry is meant to be spoken aloud. The visiting Hugo Chavez recites Tagore's celebrated lines, "Where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high," from *Gitanjali* in Spanish translation.

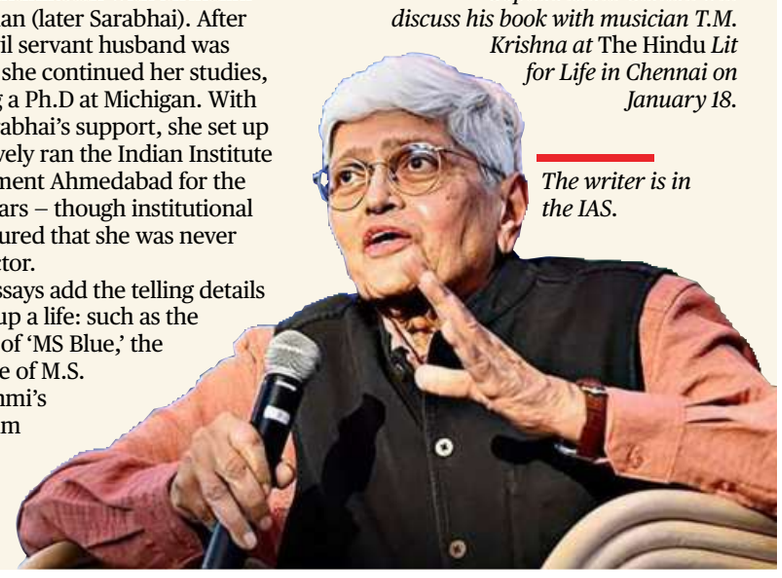
The useful 21-page index, thick with the names of people and places, reflects the wide scope of this enterprise. The volume would have benefited from a chronological arrangement and minimal contextual footnotes. This can easily be done in a later edition.

Gopal Gandhi writes not as superficial raconteur but as a thoughtful and humane voice. As grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and Chakravarty Rajagopalachari, as public servant and diplomat, and as aide to two Presidents of India, he has been witness to India's history at close quarters.

This is not a book to be read lightly. It demands sustained moral attention. In returning us to the questions and moments of inflection in history, *India and her Futures* fulfils Confucius's counsel, as a meditation on the past and its intellectual inheritance in the present.

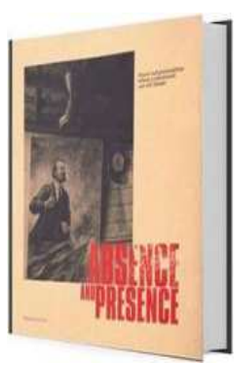
Gopalkrishna Gandhi will discuss his book with musician T.M. Krishna at The Hindu *Lit for Life in Chennai on January 18.*

The writer is in the IAS.

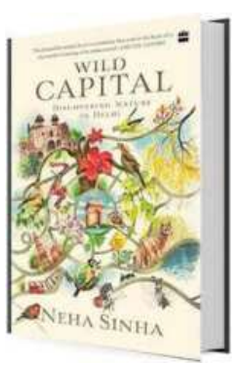


BROWSER

Absence and Presence
Swapan Nayak
Musui Art Foundation
₹1,500
The Communist Party of India turned 100 on December 26, 2025. An independent photographer has traced its journey by capturing the essence of the CPI's "struggle against tyranny, oppression and exploitation". Travelling across 11 States, Nayak chronicles the lives of pioneers and documents important events, creating a historical archive.

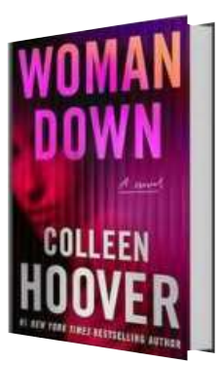


Wild Capital
Neha Sinha
HarperCollins
₹799
The nature writer's forthcoming book explores the capital's wildlife, discovering ancient groves of trees, forgotten rivers, mammal tracks and bird calls. She takes readers on a journey through the hidden wilderness of the busy metropolis, over many days and nights, finding creatures in the wild and more.



Palaver
Bryan Washington
Atlantic Books
₹1,100 (ebook)
In this novel set mostly in Tokyo, the unnamed narrator, a gay Black American working as a tutor, struggles to build a life far away from his family. When his estranged mother unexpectedly lands at his doorstep, the two begin a painful journey together, unravelling the complexities of family, love, and understanding.

Woman Down
Colleen Hoover
Montlake
₹129 (ebook)
After the controversies surrounding the movie adaptation of her bestselling novel *It Ends With Us*, starring Blake Lively, Hoover removed herself from the public eye for a few months. She now returns with a book she calls her darkest one yet. Featuring an embattled author, it seems like a meta take on Hoover's own recent scandals.



INTERVIEW

VICTIM OF TRAUMA

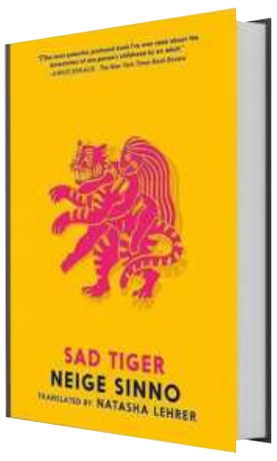
Fear, shame, social pressure — Neige Sinno on why she took long to report and write the story of sexual abuse by her stepfather

Author Neige Sinno

Radhika Santhanam
radhika.s@thehindu.co.in

In *Sad Tiger* [Seven Stories Press], translated from the French by Natasha Lehrer, Neige Sinno offers a vivid and cerebral account of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather, from around the age of seven and continuing well into her teens. *Sad Tiger* is, however, more than a memoir; in it, Sinno carries out a forensic analysis of the entire episode – exploring herself as a child, of her mother and her reaction to the rape when she found out, of her stepfather and the possible motivations behind his actions, of the complicated meaning of consent in child sexual abuse, and of the way society treats rapists. Published in France in 2023, it won multiple awards. Sinno will be at *The Hindu* Lit For Life in Chennai. Edited excerpts from an interview on Zoom:

Question: *Was this your first attempt at writing about the experience?*
Answer: It was not exactly my first attempt, because I have always been interested in power relationships, violence, sexual abuse, and relationships between people and their families. What was new was the autobiographical angle. I have never written before about something that has happened to me. And it is something I did not want to do for many reasons. One obvious reason was the shame related to the topic; the shame that society puts on the victim. I think it would have been easier for me to use this material for a work of fiction. [But] It was hard for me to separate the artistic making of the work from the emotional weight of the subject. The boundary becomes blurry when you are working on autobiographical material, especially when it is painful.



At some point, the project came out in my day-to-day writing routine. I wrote those first pages and I kept them in a file on my computer. One day, I re-read those pages, and I could see the whole book.

Q: *People often ask why survivors did not speak sooner. What do you wish people understood about survivors staying silent and about delayed disclosures?*
A: Even though I spoke about it quite early, when I was 14-15, I still wonder why I did not speak before that. One hypothesis is that this is how trauma works. When you are a victim of trauma, there is a lot of fear that you are going to get killed by the person who raped you. For children, it feels dangerous to speak. You're scared that the world as you know it is going to disappear. You're also scared that if you speak and nothing happens, that will be horrible as well. There is also the question of shame – you are taught from childhood that people who speak about these subjects are made outcasts.

Also, as a victim of trauma, you're never completely sure of whether what you have been through is even real. The aggressor is probably going to deny all of it and you wonder whether people will trust your word.

Q: *You write that your stepfather's actions are "beyond comprehension." [In your portrayal] he largely appears as an ordinary man. Did his actions always remain beyond comprehension, or did the process of writing bring any clarity?*
A: Yes and no. From the beginning, I say I know I am not going to understand, I am not going to come to terms with this story. But some concepts that I was reading about in a more theoretical way in feminist literature did become clearer to me. I had this clarity of my own story being related to the larger structural problem of the distribution of power in the family, at the workplace, and in society.

Q: *You also explore in detail existing literature on sexual abuse, and some mixed feelings about it. What did reading and writing about literature on this subject do for you?*
A: I have mixed feelings about literature on abuse. I've talked about this with other writers who have had similar experiences. And they say that they also have rushes, these moments of documenting themselves obsessively. And at other moments, they feel overwhelmed by the pain and the intensity and the weirdness of this obsession.

What I meant when I say that literature didn't save me is that my writing is not the only therapeutic way of saving myself. I'm not doing this only for myself.

But of course, literature is very important in my life. Literature and reading have helped me in a general sense as a human being. They have opened so many doors for me. But literature for me is not a way of getting away from the childhood trauma.

Q: *When writing from memory about trauma, what were the challenges?*
A: It was a question of finding a balance. I wanted the book to be short enough to be read and I wanted to offer my reader a reading that was not interrupted too much. There was the process of choosing information interesting enough, but also having moments that slowed down the book. I didn't want a rape scene that was too intense for the reader; I wanted some moments of rest, so I had literary analysis in between, which are less demanding of the reader than my own story.

Of course, I did not include some memories because I wanted to protect myself and my brothers and sisters. Autobiographical writing is not only about yourself. The close family is in the book and I had to do this in a respectful way. It wasn't easy.

Neige Sinno will be a part of The Hindu *Lit for Life in Chennai on January 17.*

What to expect at The Hindu *Lit for Life 2026*

The 13th edition of the literature festival on January 17-18 will feature Banu Mushtaq, Kiran Desai and a host of other writers, artists and thinkers

Author Manu S. Pillai (far left) at *The Hindu* Lit for Life Dialogue 2025 in Hyderabad last month. (SIDDHANT THAKUR)

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

Booker Prize winners, parliamentarians, doctors, judges, journalists, artists, a chess master, chefs *et al* will descend on Chennai for the *The Hindu* Lit for Life, on January 17-18. Readers will get a chance to dip into the minds of these personalities as they discuss issues of contemporary relevance, from democracy, human rights, justice and equality to health, history, economy and the media.

Former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud will begin proceedings on Day 1 with a talk about his latest book, *Why the Constitution Matters: Selected Speeches*, with N. Ravi, Director, Kasturi and Sons Limited. Justice Chandrachud writes in the Introduction that the Constitution, in its original design, anticipated debate, contestation and growth. He hopes that the speeches in the book prompt readers to reflect and understand that "our democracy, like our Constitution, remains a living, striving work in progress".

There's something for everyone at the festival. A philosophy enthusiast? Listen to A.C. Grayling and Chandan Gowda. Interested in social justice? Historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy will discuss 'Periyar: Icon and Iconoclast' with journalist Kavitha Muralidharan. Concerned about the media? Turn to journalist-writers Pankaj Mishra and Samanth Subramaniam who will be in conversation with N. Ram, director of *The Hindu* Publishing Group.

Literature in translation
International Booker Prize-winning duo, author Banu Mushtaq and translator Deepa Bhasthi, will talk about their experience of a phenomenal victory with *Heart Lamp*, a powerful collection of short stories originally in Kannada.

Kiran Desai's new novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*, has been on almost all best-books lists, besides being shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Readers can find out more about her writing process in her conversation with Nirmala Lakshman, Chairperson, The Hindu Group, and Festival Director, *The Hindu* Lit for Life.

In another session, author and columnist Shobhaa De will talk to Rosella Stephen, Senior Associate Editor, *The Hindu*, about her new book, *The Sensual Self*, a guide to sensuality and intimacy.

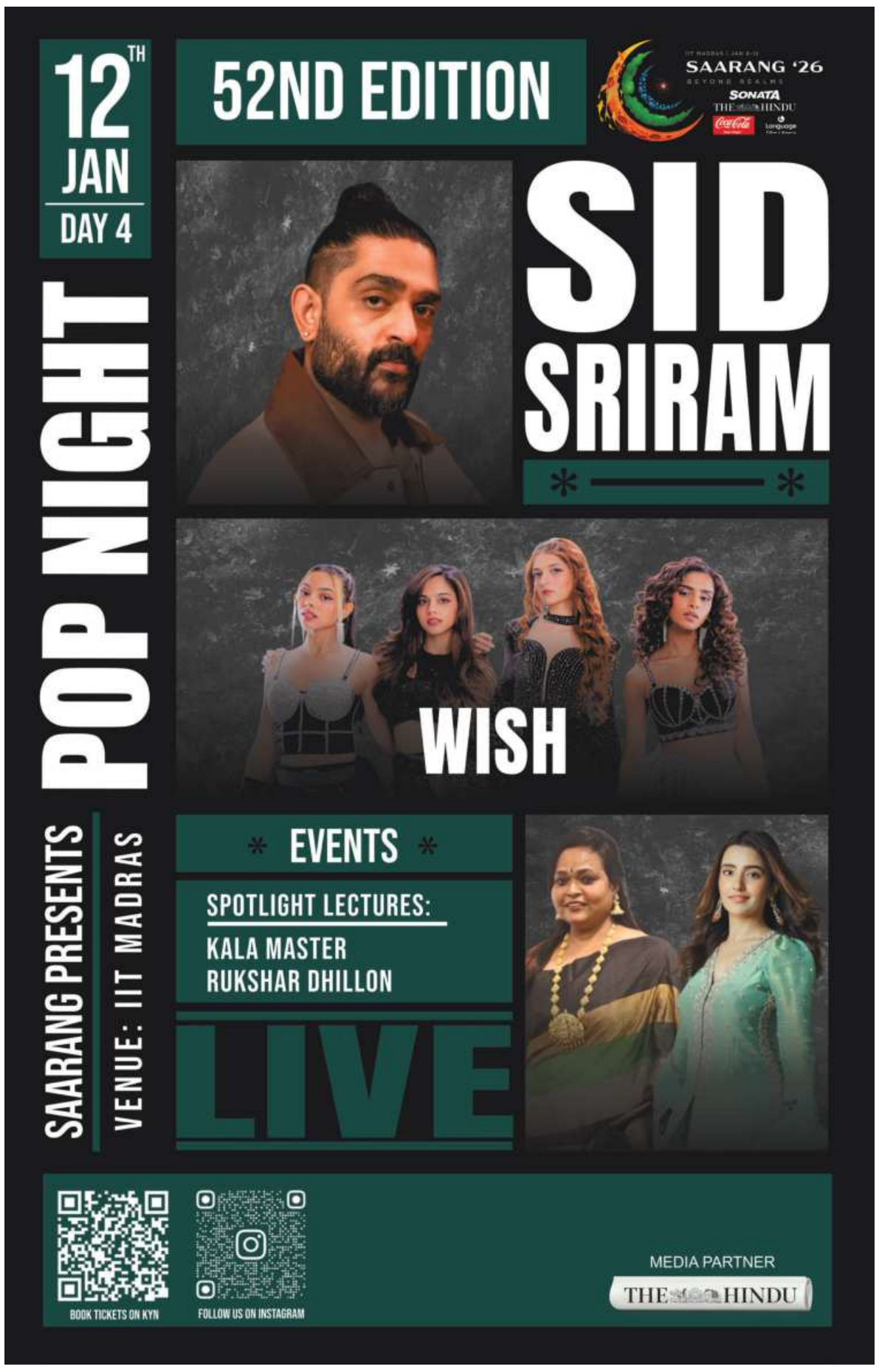
Graphic artist Appupen and Tamil writer Perumal Murugan will discuss their reimagining of C.S. Chellappa's 1949 novella *Vaadivaasal*, which captures the ethos of *jallikattu*, with Ramya Kannan, Chief of Bureau – Tamil Nadu, *The Hindu*.

Ozempic, chess...
Well-known endocrinologist Dr. Ambrish Mithal's new book, written with Shivam Vij, *The Weight Loss Revolution*, arrived just prior to India launching the weight-loss drug Ozempic for diabetics. Dr. Mithal has always cautioned that drugs like Ozempic must be taken under guidance of experts. Vij's use of Ozempic was under Dr. Mithal's guidance and they will speak about that journey.

At a session on the Northeast, often overlooked in mainland discourse, writers Janice Pariat and Jim Wungramyao Kasom will talk to Aienla Ozukum, publishing director at Aleph Book Company.

In recent years, Indian chess has seen a phenomenal rise, and Grandmaster Vishwananthan Anand who has played a stellar role in the game's meteoric ascent, will elaborate on the Anand effect, and what lies ahead in a conversation with *The Hindu*'s Sports Editor, K.C. Vijaya Kumar.

Workshops
A host of workshops will be conducted over the two days of the festival, including one on early Tamil epigraphy with a focus on Tamil Brahmi and Vatteluttu scripts. A documentary on Tamil Nadu's wildlife and biodiversity, directed by Emmy-nominated filmmaker and photographer Kalyan Varma, will also be screened.



CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Occasionally, they shout "Down with Musk", raising their banners and placards. But the crowd remains gentle. Behind them, outside a cafe, a small band punctuates the slogans with strums of guitars and beats of drums, singing folk songs. Cars passing by honk in solidarity, each honk met with cheers. There is a lightness in the air. The protest feels, strangely, festive.

"Which car do you drive?" I ask Nagarvala as we stand watching. "I'm not answering that," he says with a smile, and looks away.

A silver lining

The next morning in San Jose, I walk down East Campbell Avenue, bright and crisp like the days before. On Sundays, it becomes an open-air market. No cars, just foot traffic. Steak sizzles at one stall; at another, homemade kombucha is poured by the jug. There is vegan ice cream, crystal keychains, and families drifting between them all, tasting and lingering with Sunday ease.

I walk to the far end to meet Rahul (name changed to protect identity), once a senior of mine in college and now working in the tech industry in AI. We settle for tea at a shop that sells all things tea – loose leaves, cups, and strainers. 'Thank you for supporting small businesses,' reads a sign out front. An elderly woman, possibly the owner, recommends a tea made from berries. She brews it for us on the spot. It tastes tart and refreshing.

Rahul tells me he has finally received his Green Card after 16 years in the country. In between, he's been laid off twice from big tech firms. He is now preparing to join a start-up. "From BigTech to a start-up. Quite a change," I wonder aloud. "Yes," he replies. "But a Series C or D start-up is worth it. The funding's in place. Less risk. And you get equity, too."

> **Indians come to stay, while the** Chinese tend to go back. They have to care for their parents, and being single children, they bear that responsibility more than us Indians. Any policy Trump dreams up should factor that in
>
> **PHIROZE NAGARVALA**
> Retired professional, Berkeley

I ask him about the ongoing and impending layoffs as we watch the crowd drift past. "Yes, it's true that AI is cannibalising the entry-level jobs," Rahul says. "Those roles can be automated first. But the other reason is cost. These companies want to free up capital to invest in energy-intensive data centres. Those will be their temples."

I ask Rahul the same question I had asked Agarwal – what about the Indians in the Valley?

"The most impacted would be the consulting firms, the likes of Infosys and TCS. That's because their engineers carry out routine maintenance tasks. Since budgets have shrunk, these tasks can be automated first," he says. "Outside, Dubai or Abu Dhabi are going all out to attract AI investments. China has had a national AI programme running for almost a decade now, and the speed at which they operate is outshining even Silicon Valley. So, other countries are making substantial investments. However, Silicon Valley is still the beating heart. Many start-ups, even though birthing someplace else, eventually look towards the Valley to set up shop and scale up."

So, all is not lost, I suppose. "Not at all," he says. "Us Indians, especially, are very entrepreneurial. I see many actively re-educating to move into AI. In fact, I get calls from lots of Indian managers here asking for advice on how to upskill to be prepared to meet this new reality."

CAUGHT BETWEEN TRUMP AND THE MACHINE

Rahul is one of the few who sees a sliver of light in the confusion. Instead of resisting change, he has re-invented himself by teaching himself AI, reskilling deliberately, and preparing for a future that is already arriving. He speaks about this new reality with an optimism that doesn't deny the risks, but refuses to be paralysed by them. And he isn't alone.

That sentiment surfaces again in a later conversation with another contact, a program manager at Microsoft, who asks to remain anonymous. Yes, she acknowledges, Microsoft has cut roughly 4% of its global workforce in 2025. But the mandate inside the company is unambiguous: do targeted hiring to build AI capabilities, and set a clear expectation that every employee must begin using AI agents in their daily work.

> **American companies are pivoting** – for and because of AI. Some like Apple have hired AI agents as interns to test the waters. Everyone's trying to optimise, and hoping to land on a business model that pays. Until then, the churn will continue
>
> **NISHANT AGARWAL**
> Product manager at TikTok

Graduating students at Harvard University in May 2025, a tense period when visas of several international students were revoked by the Trump administration. (GETTY IMAGES)

"My job now is to write a one-pager describing user needs and technical requirements and hand it to a coder," she tells me. "Earlier, that coder would have been human. Now, the first version is always built by an AI agent." Entry-level roles, she admits, will inevitably thin out. But for people like her, Indians skilled in technology, it also opens a window: not just to adapt, but to lead. There are no formal playbooks yet. The only way forward is self-education till university curriculum catches up. And that, she says, is exactly what most of them are doing.

The Valley after hours

The streets of San Jose are quiet when I return after meeting Rahul. I have no destination, no one to meet. In the dying light, I study the tall buildings surrounding me that are home to SAP, Zoom, Adobe, and other tech giants. The towers stand still, hollow like the ribcages of a dying beast. It is Sunday, yes, but I wonder if this emptiness is permanent, slowly being filled by the silent hum of algorithms running not just around us, but us.

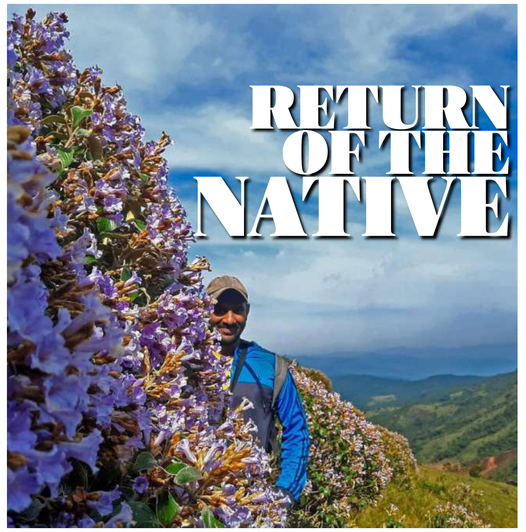
On a paper napkin at Mylapore, Agarwal had sketched the math: tens of thousands of Indians at risk of losing jobs in Silicon Valley in roles already exposed to AI. Rahul had put it more bluntly: survival means re-education. Nagarvala, from another generation, reminded me that Indians have always come here to stay, to find permanence in a place built on flux. I think of them all. For Indians in the Valley, the future lies in reinvention, there seems no other way.

From a distance, I hear music. I follow it to an open-air club. Loud music blares, and lights flicker across the crowd. Inside, people dance, moving like they are in a trance – unsure, perhaps even fearful, of what the future holds. I grab a barstool and reflect on my future. Having moved from Europe to the U.S., I have to confront this new reality and what it means to me.

In Europe, AI had so far lived in conversation, bound by guardrails on ethics and regulation, enclosed in long debates about what should or shouldn't be built. In the U.S., AI lives in its use, driven by speed, scale, and deployment. A quiet assumption lies underneath – that if something works, it will find its place.

I realise that having moved borders, I need to bridge these two realities. In a perfect world, we need both – some of us looking at AI as a philosophical problem to solve and some of us experimenting with AI to make it a tool that produces economic benefits. Sitting between these two worlds, I find myself valuing both: the European instinct to pause, and the American urge to move, while learning that the real work lies in translating between them.

The writer is a U.S.-based professional with an interest in travel and culture reporting.



RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Lessons from local communities, ecologists and the government to rebuild the Nilgiris ecosystem and bring back its wildlife

K. Jeshi
jeshi.jeshi@thehindu.co.in

At the 24-acre tea plantation in Ammagal Tea Estate in Udhagamandalam (Ooty), Tamil Nadu, a large number of deer can be sighted grazing quietly. The herbivore, in turn, brings predators such as dhole, leopard, and tiger.

This tea plantation within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve has now been partly restored to its erstwhile indigenous grassland, *shola* and wetland habitat. "This year, we completed the first phase of restoring around eight acres. As it is a watershed for over 20 hamlets downstream, it has helped the little valley. The Nilgiri wood pigeon has moved into the area. Indian giant squirrels, sloth bears, and tigers have been seen," says Ramneek Singh, co-founder of Edhkwehlynawd Botanical Refuge (EBR), an ecological sanctuary in the Nilgiris.

The Nilgiris Plateau that lies at an elevation of about 900m-2,637m above sea level is spread over 2,000 sq.km. and has a forest cover of over 60%. Grasslands and tropical montane forests called *sholas* form a tightly interlinked mosaic in the upper Nilgiris. It is home to some of the most endangered animals, such as the Nilgiri langur, Nilgiri marten, and endemic grassland birds like the pipit, the laughing thrush and Nilgiri *sholakili*.

However, with 70% of the plateau replaced by plantations, invasive species, and exotics, less than 9% of that mosaic survives now; remaining in and around the Mukurthi National Park.

Deforestation driven by agricultural expansion, infrastructure development and unregulated tourism has fragmented forests and disrupted wildlife movement, intensifying human-animal conflict and deaths. Ecologists say, this cumulative damage has made rewilding essential.

While ecologically fragile landscapes such as the Aravalli Hills and Great Nicobar Island are facing erasure due to mining projects and tourism and infrastructure development, respectively, the Nilgiris present a different narrative led by civil society movements, environmental groups, indigenous communities, and conservationists.

Over the last 12 years, ecologist Vasanth Bosco has built a nursery with 150 native *shola*-grassland species. In 2025 alone, he planted more than 25,000 native tussock grasses, shrubs, trees, herbs, and sedges, taken on 15 new restoration sites, and began work for the first time in the lower elevations, a zone neglected in ecological revival efforts, covering 3,000 acres in total. "We are focusing on the often-overlooked groups like sedges, reeds, grasses, and herbs that play critical roles in ecosystem health," he says, adding, "In some places, we have brought back entire pockets of *sholas* and revived streams. At Doddabetta restoration, the highest mountain in the Nilgiris at 2,637 metres, bison, barking deer, leopards, and wild dogs have returned."

(Clockwise from left) Tarun Chhabra with the Nilgiri lily; Vasanth Bosco with the golden kurinji; and restoration work by Keystone Foundation. (SATHYAMOORTHY M., GANESH G., KEYSTONE FOUNDATION)

Local knowledge

Kotagiri-based Keystone Foundation, which has been working with indigenous people and local communities for over three decades, has built five community-owned native species nurseries at different forest types, all managed by the locals. "We have identified more than 200 hectares of lands overtaken by invasive species and have started restoring it. These efforts have given us new knowledge on how to restore high-altitude wetlands and grasslands, to manage invasive species, and to grow shola forests, etc. This has also stopped old practices like planting trees in wetlands and on grasslands," says Anita Varghese, director of biodiversity at the foundation and steering committee member, Ecological Restoration Alliance (EBR).

The traditional ecological knowledge of the Todas, one of the earliest tribes of the Nilgiris, has also been a guiding force in restoration. "In our planning, we use their knowledge: of the *avful* grass used to thatch their temples, to wild balsams – *Nawtty* – indicating yearly seasons and their stages. We also learnt that species like the Nilgiri Daphne-leaf and dye barberry can be used as pioneering species for *shola* restoration," says retired dentist Tarun Chhabra, an expert on the indigenous Toda culture and ecology and co-founder of EBR.

The grassy understory

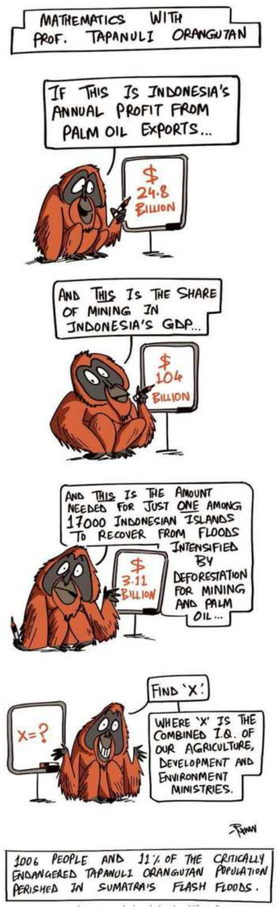
At the heart of the forest department's Nilgiri Tahr Project is restoring *shola* grasslands in areas like Upper Bhavani, once the habitat of the highly endangered state animal. "More than 34,000 hectares in Sathyamangalam and Mudumalai Tiger Reserves have been cleared of invasive lantana and *Senna spectabilis*. In the upper Nilgiris, the government is removing eucalyptus and wattle to restore native montane grasslands," says Supriya Sahu, principal secretary (environment, climate change and forests).

The focus, as Tarsh Thekaekara of The Shola Trust says, is on creating functioning ecosystems that the forest can sustain itself. "We have cleared around 50 hectares of lantana in Mudumalai and are bringing back native grasses. We already see greater number of mammals at our restored grassy areas. The droppings will act as natural fertiliser and spread the seeds. Deer and mammals will become our planters."

Every restoration effort, however, is a negotiated relationship between people, place, plants, and animals, reminds Suprabha Seshan, custodian of the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Wayanad, Kerala. "Clearing exotics, planting natives, working with communities are valuable but unless root causes like environmental toxification, chemical pollution, soil and water contamination are confronted, it remains only the 'tip of the iceberg'."

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty


MATHEMATICS WITH PROF. TAPANULI ORANGUTAN
IF THIS IS INDONESIA'S ANNUAL PROFIT FROM PALM OIL EXPORTS...
$ 24.8 BILLION
AND THIS IS THE SHARE OF MINING IN INDONESIA'S GDP...
$ 104 BILLION
AND THIS IS THE AMOUNT NEEDED FOR JUST ONE AMONG 17000 INDONESIAN ISLANDS TO RECOVER FROM FLOODS INTENSIFIED BY DEFORESTATION FOR MINING AND PALM OIL...
$ 3.11 BILLION
FIND 'X'
X=?
WHERE 'X' IS THE COMBINED I.Q. OF OUR AGRICULTURE, DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT MINISTRIES.
JOHN
100% PEOPLE AND 11% OF THE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED TAPANULI ORANGUTAN POPULATION PERISHED IN SUMATRA'S FLASH FLOODS.

TRIBUTE | 1943-2025

GEETA DOCTOR, THE SHARP OBSERVER

The writer and critic, who passed away on December 31, leaves behind a legacy of words, laughter and the lives she documented

Leela Samson

Truthfully, I was rather intimidated by Geeta Doctor. For she was not a traditional person. Geeta was, I think, a non-believer. She seemed to critique different art expressions with what you might call 'a clean slate'. She was happy to learn, to observe, comment on all art forms – literary and performative, visual and tactile, Indian or world art, not burdened by the rules thereof. Simply as 'the other'.

She was watchful and witty, a giggle lurking behind her smile, ready to unbalance you. I was often tongue-tied. (In fact, ever since I was asked to write this tribute, I have been picturing her laughing at the choice.) But that was till I was on the other side, as it were. Once I got to know her, I shared in the amusement as we took on the dance scene like buddies, if I may say so in her absence. I wouldn't dare in her presence!

Geeta read (and wrote) voraciously, and in the early 70s, she was present in her role as journalist, with a ringside seat, at a host of art movements that then emerged in Chennai. Writing a review of visual artist S.G. Vasudev's exhibition called *Vriksha* in 2010, she recalled the many layered world of the 60s, when Vasudev and a group of artists set up the self-contained Cholamandal Artists' Village. "It's been described as a Village by the Sea," she wrote. "It was in a way an epic undertaking, the old man-teacher-friend and preceptor, [founder] Paniker leading his band of faithful to make a mark for themselves in what was then a wilderness."

This was also when I first met Geeta – when Vasudev and his now deceased wife Arnawaz, a fine artist, invited me to dance on the sands outside their new home. A performance was always followed by a discussion over a simple meal and drinks. Such a vital act, when an exchange of ideas helped in understanding our own arts and the need of the time.

A bohemian spirit

Geeta began working as a journalist in Mumbai in the 1970s, for publications such as *Freedom First*, a liberal monthly, and *Parsiana*, the Parsi magazine that shut last October. She helped start *Inside Outside*, India's first design and architectural magazine. She moved to Chennai in the 1980s and wrote for many other publications, including *The Hindu*.

A few days ago, Meenakshi, her daughter, shared some of Geeta's writings with me that gave me an understanding of the range of subjects she reviewed. Even the headlines of the articles reflected the happy nature of one who seemed pleased to have walked with that book, that performance, that exhibition awhile.

For instance, writing about the food memoir *A Bite in Time: Cooking with Memories*, she remarked that it "mirrors the larger-than-life personality of [author] Tanya Mendonsa's invitation to take a bite of her life. Her real talent, as any bohemian spirit who has lived in Paris in the second half of the 20th century will recognise, is to be a *flâneur*, loosely translated it means just floating above the ground in a state of permanent enjoyment". To me, Geeta was also a *flâneur*. Her own nature was reflected time and again in her reviews of others. And

Geeta Doctor; and (below) the late writer and critic at Pulicat Lake. (MALA MUKERJEE)

so we got to know her.

In December 2016, she wrote passionately about dancer and choreographer Astad Deboo. "Does he remember it as I do, the short series of six movements in which Astad trampled upon the canvas of contemporary dance in India and laid it wide open to different interpretations? Did he actually feel the pain when he slit his arms open with a blade and allowed the blood to drip? Or later, in what became a showstopper moment, contort his lithe body, so that his tongue became part of the performance. He licked the floor of his stage as though it were his most beloved other. The floor. The stage. The dancer. The audience. We became one with the performance. Astad Deboo became contemporary dance."

Then she stated her non-partisan, broad outlook on society: "He could be a Parsi at home, a Christian at the school taught by Jesuit priests, and a student of Islamic traditions because of the Kathak dance teacher. The influences that he imbibed included that of the Bengali families, the Biharis and South Indians, all of whom enriched his idea not just of who he was but what being an Indian might be."

It was pitch-perfect. Even now, I can let out a cry of joy at that line describing what it is to be truly Indian. Penned by a writer and critic who was born in India, but grew up in France, Sweden, Switzerland and Pakistan, following her father who was in the Indian Foreign Service.

The writer is a Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer, and former director of Kalakshetra in Chennai.

One who spoke from her heart

Geeta, an octogenarian who presided over a four-generation family of strong women, often talked about how she loved food, laughter, and the company of strangers she met on her travels. Glimpses could be seen in her reviews.

In 2005, she could not contain her glee after she visited Malaysia to watch Kuala Lumpur-based choreographer and classical Bharatanatyam dancer Ramli bin Ibrahim. "Ramli follows in the tradition set by a Ram Gopal or even an Uday Shankar in taking the heroic moment by the hand and treading the path that is often so dangerous between becoming too exotic or too enchanted with his own sensuality. By insisting that it is a tribute to Odissi, perhaps, what he is also exploring is this very same appeal to the gorgeousness of Odissi that surrenders to the feminine in all its manifestations of desire."

Months before she was diagnosed with a terminal disease, she wrote about Marghazhi and the people she lived among. Although inadvertently, I believe few have summed up the season so succinctly as Geeta did in her review of the book *The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community*. "It's that time of the year when the invisible call of 'The Season' fills the air around Chennai inviting multitudes from distant lands. There is an almost imperceptible hum of the Tamil heartbeat written on the wind... that speak of a fabled past that finds expression in music and dance at different venues. In every generation, a scholar reaches into these storied depths and finds a way through the tangled roots... It makes [author] Nirmala Lakshman's extraordinarily vivid treatise on *The Tamils* doubly interesting."

For me, Geeta's was that independent outside-the-theatre-of-the-arts voice that spoke directly from the heart. It was a democratic voice. It held in it the echoes of a worldview that could see the connections and almost imperceptibly rejoice in them. She was not partisan; she did not beat about the bush. And for some of us, who recognised this, she will not be replicated. She will be missed. May she rest in peace.

The writer is a Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer, and former director of Kalakshetra in Chennai.

GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

Align your New Year energy

Say goodbye to negativity and air pollution and get 10 times fitter

We don't attend New Year dos very often, Wife and I. But when we do, we typically go to a party hosted by one of my friends. The exact reason for this is a matter of controversy.

I believe it's because I have more interesting friends who throw better parties. Wife thinks it's because of my utter lack of interest in, curiosity about, or empathy for, people who are neither journalists nor sources nor potential podcast guests. Now, it is a truth universally acknowledged that my interests are limitless, my curiosity is boundless, and my empathy, endless. Nonetheless, to settle this debate, on December 31, I accompanied her to a party thrown by one of her client-turned-friends.

It was on a rooftop. I entered the party fortified with three N95s. As we waded into the smog, I almost bumped into a woman who could've stepped out of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. She was dressed in a flowing maroon robe of some expensive curtain material. Her hair was in the style of fluorescent pineapple, neck buried in pearls and diamonds that glinted in the candlelight. I got the sense Dr. Strange might show up any minute, wielding a mandala of fire.

Healing and astral waves

Wife made the introductions. The woman turned out to be the host, Selin Sengupta, a wellness influencer who'd had the brilliant idea of throwing an outdoor party in 10,000-plus AQI.

"Hello," Selin said, extending a small bowl of gemstones that, on closer inspection, turned out to be her hand.

"Hello Selin," I said. "You have a beautiful terrace garden."

"Thank you, Mr. Mask," Selin said. "You are in the media but hiding your face like this? Visibility is everything."

"In Delhi, visibility is nothing," I said. "Flights get cancelled all the time."

"I know the air is not perfect, but you see anyone else wearing a mask here?"

I looked around. No one was.

"My lungs don't belong to anyone else," I said.

"Your lungs are there to serve you, not the other way round."

"What do you mean?"

"I see you two are getting along," Wife said. "I'll see you in a bit." She vanished into the fog and filthy air, leaving me at the mercy of Lady Macbeth.

"Do you see these candles?" Selin went on. "And the pools of pebbles?" I noticed normal-looking candles on every table. They stood on normal-looking stands that held normal-looking rocks.

"What about them?" I said.

"These are release candles," Selin said. "Light them in your home every evening. They'll protect you from pollution."

"What do they release?"

"All your blockages, what else!" she said. "The little rocks are rose quartz – healing crystals charged under the last full moon. I'll give you some – put them under your pillow. Their aura will realign your energy to the universe. The astral waves they emanate have the power to oxidise particulate matter, turning them into inarticulate matter – that's why it's safe to hang out on my terrace, mask-less."

"I see."

"You'll see only when you remove your mask," Selin said.

"No, thank you."

"Trust me," Selin insisted.

Not wanting to offend my host, I reluctantly took off one N95, then another, and when the last one came off, Selin clapped. She then took my arm and led me to a cabinet behind the bar, opened a drawer and fished out two envelopes.

"These are for you," she said, handing me two gift coupons worth ₹20,000 each. One was for a 'Prana Activation Bootcamp', where you learn to convert negative energy into positive energy. The other was for 'Quantum Manifestation Accelerator', where Selin taught techniques to manifest the best version of yourself which, incidentally, already exists in the future – the version of you that is 10x fitter, 20x smarter, and 100x richer than the current you.

Hard sell

As we were leaving the party, one of Selin's minions approached me with an 'invitation' to join her '21-day alignment challenge'. It cost ₹6,999 to sign up. Having already accepted ₹40,000 worth of vouchers, I couldn't wriggle out of it. I meekly paid up.

On the drive back, Wife was in a good mood. I was back in my N95 fortress.

"How was Selin?" She wanted to know. "Isn't she interesting?"

"The universe is listening," I said. "It will report back to Selin whatever I say."

"Admit it," she said. "You were talking to her all evening. You even took off your damn masks for her."

"I'll concede Selin has interesting energy," I said. "It's perfectly aligned with whatever she's selling."

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

PERSON OF INTEREST

This producer-distributor collects film posters and is known as director Anurag Kashyap's responsible alter ego

RANJAN SINGH: MOVIE NINJA

Ranjan Singh says his love for cinema was born in Army cantonments.

Ranjan Singh, 49, is having one of those head-against-the-wall days. We catch up before the screening of *Vaghachipani* (*Tiger's Pond*), one of several critically-acclaimed independent movies Singh has produced, and after a knotty visit to the censor board about the film *Little Thomas*. "There are many issues because it's a children's film about a kiss," he says. Set in the mid-'90s Goa, it tells the story of a seven-year-old who tries to make his parents kiss because he believes that's the way to get a sibling. "It's about keeping the family together," he adds.

Singh's four-year-old daughter understands the value of kisses thanks to her favourite show *Bluey*, Australia's most successful children's animated show about a puppy. "She asks Vijayeta (his wife, director Vijayeta Kumar), 'Do you smoochy kiss dada?'," Singh says. "And here we are saying, don't show the kiss."

Some might describe Singh as director Anurag Kashyap's responsible alter ego. Their relationship began, most aptly, at the box office and they have since collaborated on about 35 films. If Kashyap's collection of DVDs is legendary, Singh has 10,000 film posters. "We think alike about movies," Singh says. Together, they bring the country's indie scene to the attention of the world. In a famously divided industry, they believe in the power of the collective. "He's my backbone," Kashyap tells me. "It's because of him I can keep my focus on creatives. He takes care of everything and is available all the time to his filmmakers."

They met when Singh was the head of marketing at PVR Cinemas and trying to introduce moviegoers to festival films. He advertised that PVR would screen that year's Cannes winner *L'Enfant* (2005) at the company's newly-launched multiplex in Juhu, Mumbai. "I reached the box office early to see the impact of the ad and there was one guy before me," he says. They stayed in touch and when Kashyap co-founded Phantom Films, Singh came on board. He left months before Phantom shut shop, and later became the CEO of Kashyap's Good Bad Films. Two years ago, Singh left the company, shortly before Kashyap, and finally went solo with Flip Films. "The joke is that I always leave first," Singh says.

For alternative cinema

From exhibition to distribution to production, Singh's career is a bear hug of the entertainment business. He worked at Inox and PVR when they were fledgling companies and was responsible for opening multiplexes and convincing small town Indians that the tickets were worth the premium. "The great thing about that time was that you could release even a smaller film," he says. "Slowly, even in towns, an audience was building."

People watched documentaries such as *Leaving Home: The Life and Music of Indian Ocean* (2008) and *Superman of Malegaon* (2012) on the big screen. *Bheja Fry* (2007) became one of the most profitable independent films ever. "I'm pretty sure the returns were more than 15 times the cost of the film," Singh says. "That time was pure hope and you believed in it."

Somewhere along the line though, things changed. Programming focused only on the dozen or so big films of the year; ticket prices rose as cinemas installed chandeliers and sold gourmet snacks; nobody invested in building the subculture of alternative films.

"Everything started coalescing around the big films, pricing was the same for a documentary and a Salman Khan movie," Singh says. "Nobody had the business sense to build something to fall back on when the blockbusters fail. The whole purpose of four to five screens in one property is that you can play different content." For smaller films, getting the attention of audiences in a noisy marketplace has gotten harder than ever.

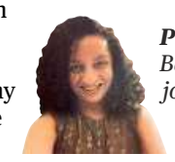
For a country that makes so many films and claims to love cinema, we have a tenth of China's nearly 100,000 cinema screens. "My guess is that the serviceable number of screens might be in the range of 6,500-7,000. Of these, the southern states have about 4,400 screens. So the rest of the country has less than 3,000 screens," Singh says. South India sees higher footfalls than the rest of the country for other reasons too. "Your ticket is subsidised and there is a cap on the number of shows," he says.

A childhood escape

Singh's love for films was born in Army cantonments. His father was a junior commissioned officer in the Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME). "I don't think there was any other access to art for me, except movies which we watched in the mess and in the ordnance theatre," he says. Life changed when he was 10 and his father retired in Vadodara. I remember going to the railway station to get copies of *Filmfare* magazine from the A.H. Wheeler shop," he says. "I still have all the issues from 1989 to 2007."

Though he immersed himself in that world – escaping to dark theatres was a balm for a difficult childhood – a career in movies didn't seem like a feasible option. He joined advertising and was pitching to a client from Inox when the man offered him a job.

As for *Little Thomas*, the Central Board of Film Certification wants to give it a UA 13+ certificate, ensuring that many children won't be able to watch it. One possible solution? Amp up the speed of the kiss.



***Priya Ramani** is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Creating an entry

Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

North-South got to show off their fancy Key Card Blackwood methods, but it was probably just for show. South, we believe, would always have bid a slam after North opened the bidding. The slam was excellent, and normal splits in both black suits would yield an easy 13 tricks. Suits often don't split normally after a preempt, however.

The three of hearts was an obvious singleton. South won in hand with the ace and led a spade to dummy's ace, followed by the queen and jack of spades. South couldn't know how the minor suits were splitting, but East was known to have started with 10 cards in the majors, so South could not count on a good club split. South

NORTH
♠ A Q J
♡ 7 6 4
◇ K Q
♣ 10 9 6 3 2

WEST
♠ 4
♡ 3
◇ J 9 8 7 6 3 2
♣ J 7 5 4

EAST
♠ 10 9 8 7
♡ K Q J 10 9 8
◇ 10 4
♣ 8

SOUTH
♠ K 6 5 3 2
♡ A 5 2
◇ A 5
♣ A K Q

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1♣	2♡	2♠	Pass
3♠	Pass	4NT	Pass
5◇	Pass	5♡*	Pass
6◇**	Pass	6♠	All pass

***Do you have the queen of spades?**
****Yes, plus the king of diamonds**

Opening lead: Three of ♡

was a resourceful player and he handled the problem beautifully. He led a club to his ace and cashed the king of spades, discarding a heart from dummy while drawing East's last trump. He cashed the king and queen of clubs, then led his low diamond to dummy's king. He led the 10 of clubs and elegantly discarded his ace of diamonds. West won with the jack but had to lead a diamond. South won in dummy, discarding a heart, and discarded his last heart on the nine of clubs. Well done.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has January 11 ever given us?

On January 11, 1908, this geographical landmark became a national monument. It is a feature created by a river that allows us to see two billion years of Earth's geological history exposed.
(GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 Born in St. Kitts and Nevis on January 11, 1755, this economist became the first United States' Secretary of the Treasury after its independence. He helped diversify its economy and expand industries. He is arguably the most famous person to die in a duel. Who is this person, recently made famous by a musical?

2 On January 11, 1787, astronomer William Herschel discovered two heavenly bodies, then named Titania and Oberon. Along with Miranda, Ariel and Umbriel, they are the five main satellites named after characters from the plays of either Shakespeare or Alexander Pope. Which planet's moons are these?

3 On January 11, 1838, accomplished portrait painter Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail sent a series of messages. They used a system of dots and dashes developed and named after Samuel. This eventually became what form of communication?

4 On January 11, 1908, this geographical landmark became a national monument. It is a feature created by a river that allows us to see two billion years of Earth's geological history exposed. What 446km-long wonder is this?

5 On January 11, 1913, a car designed by the Hudson Motor Car Company made its debut in New York. It was the first commercially available car that had different areas for engine, passenger and storage. By what name is this type of car known that has recently been overtaken by SUVs in terms of popularity?

6 On January 11, 1922, 13-year-old Leonard Thompson was administered an injection in Toronto. He became the first person to be given a certain hormone that Banting and Best had discovered the year before. What was injected into him?

7 On January 11, 1927, Louis B. Mayer, the head of film studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, announced the creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. Though it started to advance the industry, it is far more famous for which annual star-studded event?

8 Born on January 11, 1954, Kailash Satyarthi is the founder of various organisations that advocate the universal right to education and fight against child labour. In 2014, he became only the fifth Indian resident to win what accolade?

9 Born on January 11, 1973, this gentleman is one of the most respected athletes in his sport. To honour him, there is a wall at the entrance of M. Chinnaswamy cricket stadium, made of 10,000 bricks, with the words 'Commitment, Consistency, Class' inscribed on it. Who do these words describe?

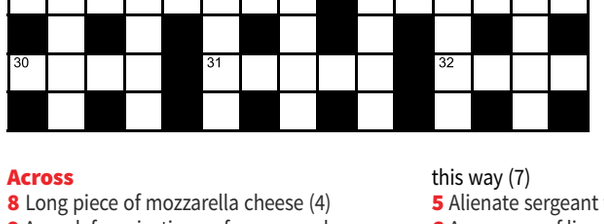
10 On January 11, 2007, this author sat in room No. 552 of the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh and finished writing the seventh and final installment in a series of novels. Who was this author and what is this series that she started writing on paper napkins at a café?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Alexander Hamilton
2. Uranus
3. Telegraph
4. Grand Canyon
5. Sedan
6. Insulin
7. Academy Awards (Oscars)
8. Nobel Prize (for Peace)
9. Rahul Dravid
10. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*

***THE HINDU* SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 38** (Set by Incognito)



Across

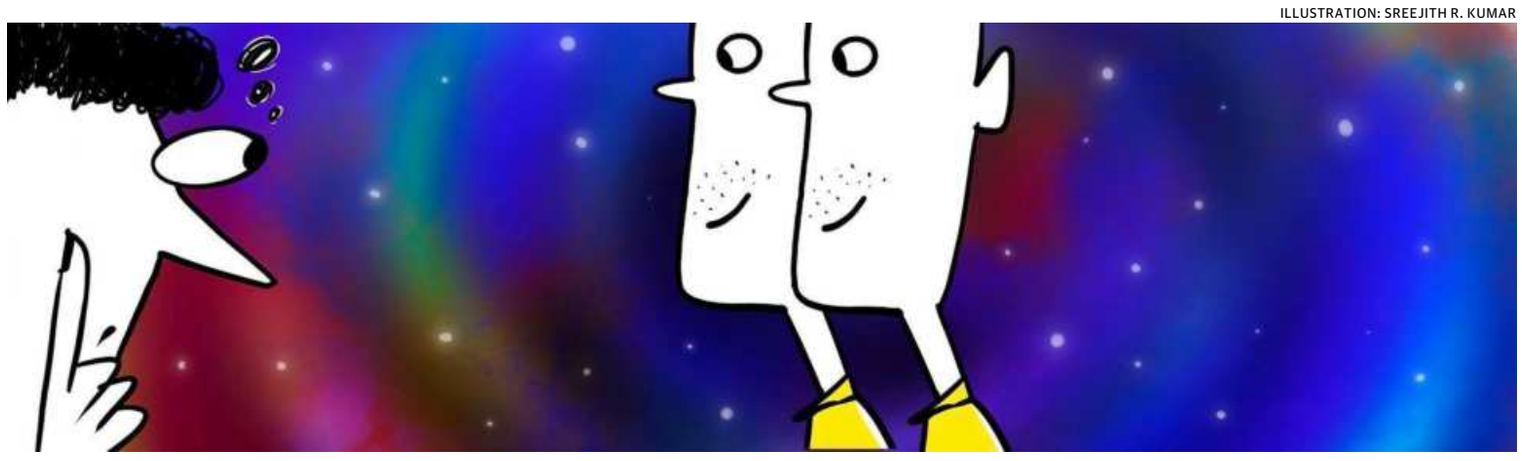
8 Long piece of mozzarella cheese (4)
9 A mark for rejection or for approval in a poll (5)
10 Turn time back and give "Out" (4)
11 Lady about to be married going around port producing animal restraint (6)
12 Jack, for example, and American mother getting spice (8)
13 When students leave alliance, take in a couple of females and engage (8)
15 Two girls getting into African river results in trivial complaint (6)
17 During goodbye in Spain, picks a violin string for slow performances (7)
19 Google is confused about unknown subject (7)
22 In time, river starting to exceed highest point (6)
24 Move on Line of Control by a truck easily at first (8)
26 Rebellious Masai rob divine nourishment (8)
28 Managed sum, I heard, for payment to kidnapper (6)
30 Softly pull and block (4)
31 Mountains in South America and Spain (5)
32 Place first trap in badger's den (4)

Down

1 Mark's automobile (4)
2 Observe dead fish and young plant (8)
3 Hide South Indian by noon (6)
4 Illegally obtained eggs can be cooked in this way (7)
5 Alienate sergeant terribly (8)
6 A measure of liquor covering bread in city (6)
7 Wandering Somali mother leaving storage building (4)
14 Tired of "...Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, ..." (3,2)
16 Legal to run away (5)
18 Organisation of American States adopts poem abroad (8)
20 Playing chess with half of London in legendary creature's residence (4,4)
21 Idiotically fool around, releasing UFO in Florida city (7)
23 Shed anger after getting attached initially (6)
25 Musician ruining styli around beginning of refrain (6)
27 Maiden gets beer in capital city (4)
29 Selects extraordinary spot (4)

SOLUTION NO. 37

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



A double-edged sword in life and literature

Mistaken identity, celebrated in fiction for its comedic value, can pose risks in reality

N. Rama Rao
ramaraon2014@gmail.com

Mistaken identity has the dubious distinction of being good in literature and not so good in real life. In fiction, this subject has been a staple of classic comedies for centuries. On the other hand, in reality, mistaken identity is rarely a source of entertainment as it can lead to embarrassing mix-ups, wrongful convictions, and tragic events.

Familiar cases of mix-up of identity involve two similarly looking persons or two persons with the same name. Years ago, twin brothers R. and K. were working as clerks in the same department of a government office in which I was working. They were so much alike that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. A newly appointed officer who took charge of their section solved the problem, by asking R. to attend office wearing a coat and directing K. not to use a coat.

In my school days, there were two students in my class whose names and initials were the same as mine. My class teacher preferred to affix number 1 to my name and allot numbers 2 and 3 to my namesakes.

In my small village, residents could easily identify their neighbours by sight. There have been instances when a visiting stranger found moving about suspiciously was either punished or driven out by the villagers. However, this method of identifying people proved dangerous at times, due to human error. In a recent incident, a 40-year-old man was allegedly lynched by villagers who mistook him for a thief. In another case, mistaken identity claimed the life of an upright man when armed assailants killed the wrong target.

Recently, in a highly bizarre incident near Chennai, an elderly woman who was supposed to be dead in a rail accident returned home even as her final rites were being performed by her relatives. This faux pas was due to wrong identification of a mutilated body at the scene of the accident by the son of the woman. A few years ago, mistaken identity had cost an innocent cricketer the chance to bag an IPL contract; in a curious twist of fate, one of the two cricketers who shared similar names suffered because of misreporting of an incident in a section of the media. A young man attempted suicide recently as his photograph was published in the newspapers by mistake in lieu of that of a suspect in a dramatic daylight heist of over ₹7 crore.

There have been many legal cases in India involving mistaken identity. Often wrongful convictions happen when an eyewitness incorrectly identifies the arrested person. Erroneous identification remains a significant legal defence in many cases. For instance, in a narcotics case, a woman was acquitted by the Supreme Court as the prosecution failed to prove the identity of the arrested person beyond a reasonable doubt. Courts are increasingly scrutinising identification evidence and holding that a person cannot be convicted for the crime of another, especially when there is a fundamental error in identification. Advances in forensic science, such as fingerprint analysis, have, therefore, become crucial in establishing or disproving identity in mistaken identity cases.

Talking of mistaken identity in literature, the first thing that comes to mind is Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* in which two sets of identical twins who were separated at birth cause confusion among themselves and others. Inspired by plays of this kind by Shakespeare and others, hundreds of entertaining farces and movies that centre on identification blunders have been produced in several languages over the years across the world.

Dual role is a popular technique adopted in hilarious Indian films. Gemini Production's magnum opus *Apoorva Sagodharargal* (1949) was one of the early Tamil films that surprised viewers by the adoption of this technique. The way to face mistaken identity in real life depends on the situation in which one is placed. You could correct a person verbally if he mistook you for somebody else. If accosted by a law enforcing authority, the best way to resolve the issue is to produce your ID with other supporting documents, if need be.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

India's longevity movement is steadily gaining momentum, blending ancient wellness traditions with modern science. ('Forever is now'; Jan. 4) Increased focus on preventive healthcare, nutrition, fitness and mental well-being reflects growing preparedness for healthy ageing.
N.S. Reddy

Change with the times

The interview with Dr. Rhee Kun Hoo was an insightful read. ('A Korean master's guide to a happy life'; Jan. 4) Planning the second innings of life is more fundamental than ever before, as increased longevity requires us to adapt to changing times. Engaging with younger generations helps in sustaining purpose and vitality.
A.R. Kattamreddy

Role models

All of the nonagenarians share a common thing and that is their positive attitude. The legacy they leave behind is commendable and worth emulating.
N.K. Raja

Evergreen legends

The old-growth trees stand as silent witnesses across India. ('Speak for the trees'; Jan. 4) Over the years, these evergreen legends have served multiple functions: sustaining animal life and acting as the lungs of the environment. Such illustrious trees, both native and non-native to India, have quietly shaped our ecosystems and timelines alike.
Monita Sutherson

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The question of 'Why me?'
A troubling poser with an uncertain answer
Suraj Nagarajaiah

The gift of accepting mistakes
Accept that fallibility is universal, stop treating wrongs of others as affronts
Priyan R. Naik

Are we partial to cricket?
An equitable yardstick would be to uniformly promote all games strictly in line with the extent of their popularity
George Netto

The myth of acceptance
High expectations contradict the celebration of diversity that humanity claims to uphold
Daksh Arora

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The power of saying 'no'

R. Jennifer Jefreena
jeebdeed@gmail.com

Growing up, many of us did not get the privilege of saying "no". We grew up in houses where obedience means everything. In our households, a simple "no" is interpreted as rebellion, arrogance, or even the influence of "bad company". Just to avoid all the drama that follows that one "no", we get used to saying "yes". And slowly, we turn into people who prioritise others' comfort over our own boundaries.

What does that lead to? A feeling of losing our own self, our autonomy. The lingering feeling of constraints around our throat. Moments filled with wanting to disagree with someone but unable to reject their plea. Moments that feel like being in a battlefield. Only to end up accepting their request. Do we gain anything from all that? Just the sense of losing ourselves gets stronger with every undesirable "yes" that leaves our mouth. What's left is a feeling of resentment towards ourselves.

The only way out of this cycle is learning to say "no". A firm and strong "no". It might not feel like an easy task. But every habit has to start from somewhere. The first "no" may feel heavy on the tongue. It might even be painful. But when we get used to saying it, it will flow right out as a guilt-free "no". Over time, that "no" can join us together piece by piece. It moulds one into a person who is the owner of her self. It will liberate us. And when we feel liberated, we can see all the other possibilities that life holds for us much more clearly.

Meeting to meeting, corporate life is a blur

Many degrade into sessions that are unproductive and without clear agendas

Sudha Devi Nayak
sudhadevi_nayak@yahoo.com

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Meetings, meetings... Most organisations, private or public, thrive on meetings. Announced at the drop of a hat, before you know it, people congregate in conference halls and auditoriums. Of course, there are planned meetings with differing schedules that could ruin your weekends with sleepless hours likely to take a toll on your peace of mind.

You are expected to be battle-ready with all your notes and with answers to ominous questions on your fingertips. At these meetings, tortuous deadlines are pronounced with a grim non-negotiable finality that stalked you wherever you went, be it the lunch room, recreation room, wash room or library. Our lives are measured out in endless meetings, interminable reviews and tired justifications of status quo.

When we joined corporates for the comfortable careers we dreamt of and coveted the corner room in the distant future, we did not bargain for the number of meetings we had to attend, the mandatory ones that arrived on date, those called performance reviews, budget meetings where budgets were imposed on the hapless workforce to achieve the corporate targets or corporate policies to be implemented.

Meetings sometimes degenerated into desultory affairs far from being meaningful without a clear agenda, endless discussions that did not resolve into any concrete decisions. A group of people who talk for hours to produce a result called minutes. However not all meetings were purposeless; there were those that that set clear guidelines and schedules, where debate and discussion took place with heat and light, where genuine performers were appreciated and under-performers were encouraged to give a better account of themselves, and non-performers were gently reprimanded or cautioned so that it struck home and they almost always performed much better.

The powers that be who presided over those meetings were a motley lot, those with empathy who could tell us where we went wrong and improve and those who were unforgiving and demolished us with a word. One or two even had a literary flair and would quote with aplomb. When a colleague demurred and doubted his capabilities to handle a particular project he was told in no uncertain terms: "You can do it." Our doubts are our traitors. A less sympathetic boss once remarked with a smirk, "Hell hath no fury like a boss enraged."

While we resented meetings for eating into our productive work time, we also saw them as a meeting place for all of us who though working in adjoining rooms had rarely time to meet except of course for the brief water cooler or coffee machine moments. There were also welcome and farewell gatherings that were lighter and happier occasions and the sad condolence meetings for well-loved departed colleagues.

THE HINDU GROUP

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THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, January 11, 2026

The beginning of the social system is rooted in political contingencies and economic circumstances, not ideas of purity, pollution or racial differences

HOMO OPPORTUNISTICUS

THE MAKING OF CASTE

Tony Joseph

The origin of the caste system does not lie in religious ideas of purity and pollution, racial differences, tribal or Harappan customs – or even the British census, as recent social media commentary would suggest. It lies in ancient political contingencies and economic circumstances.

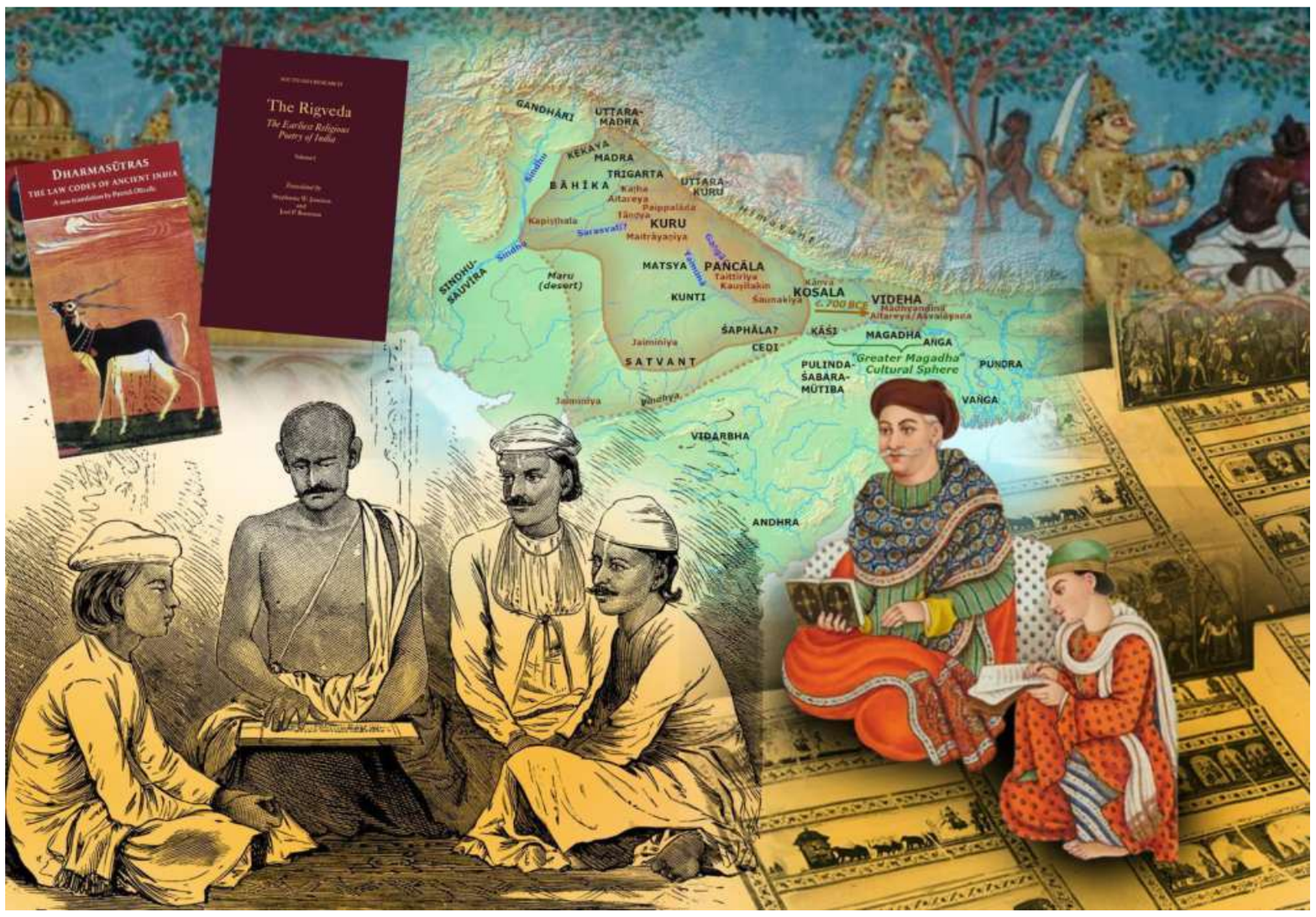
The earliest mention of a four-tiered hierarchy occurs in the *Purusha Sukta* of the *Rigveda*. But it is commonly accepted that this is a late book, and that the *Purusha Sukta* is a later insertion. There is no mention of the shudra in the *Rigveda* outside of the *Purusha Sukta*. There are only doubtful and rare occurrences of even 'brahmana' as a social category. Therefore, one can agree with Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton in their 2014 translation of *The Rigveda*, that in the earliest religious poetry of India, the caste system is embryonic.

But how did that embryo come to be? Studies by scholars Michael Witzel (*The Realm of the Kuru*) and Thennilapuram Mahadevan (*The Rsi Index of the Vedic Anukramani System and Pravara Lists: Toward a Prehistory of the Brahmans*) provide the keenest insight.

To recount Witzel's arguments briefly, the tribe of the Kurus became predominant after the Battle of the Ten Kings or Dasrajna mentioned in the *Rigveda*. After the battle, the "geographical centre of the Vedic civilization" moved eastwards from Punjab to Kurukshetra, the land lying between rivers Sarasvati and Drishadvati, about 175 kilometres northwest of New Delhi. (This region would later come to be subsumed under the term Aryavarta, defined as being the region between the Himalayas and the Vindhyas, and to the east of where river Saraswati disappears and west of the Kalaka forest, which is supposed to have been at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna.)

As they consolidated their power, the Kurus felt the need for a unified canon, drawing on the sacrificial hymns of their own tribe as well as defeated tribes. The last hymn of the *Rigveda* is about unity. It says: "Come together, speak together; together let your thoughts agree..."

Until this happened, around 1000 BCE, writes Witzel, "the *Rigvedic* hymns were held as 'personal or clan property'". When a common canon was made out of these collections, writes Mahadevan, the families that were once in charge of their own hymnal traditions became the backbone of a 'pan-Vedic agency to sing a pan-Vedic corpus'. There being no writing at this time, they were now an 'oral agency' carrying forward a common tradition, now 'bound into a biological body' through new rules regulating marriages among them.



Varanasi was important for those on both sides of the debate over *varna*: brahmanas and sramanas; (above, clockwise from bottom left) an engraving of brahmanas learning; *Dharmasutras* and *The Rigveda*; the Greater Magadha cultural sphere; *Rigveda* title sheet; *Rigveda* bundles; and a Khatri nobleman. (GETTY IMAGES, WIKI COMMONS, R. SHIVAJI RAO AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES)

The first 'caste' takes shape

As Mahadevan tells it, each of those who had a collection of family songs was now called a *gotra*. The new rules were that marriages must not occur within the same *gotra* (exogamy), but must occur within the 50-odd *gotras* (endogamy), thus creating 'One, Out of Many', "the 'caste' of Brahmans". The brahmanas are thus the first and perhaps the only real '*varna*/caste' to be formed at a particular time and place, with enormous implications for the future.

The 'ksatriya' or the warrior/ruler caste will be mostly decided de facto: those who manage to get and keep power are regarded as ksatriyas. Historian D.D. Kosambi once wrote: "Don't be misled by the Indian Ksatriya caste, which was oftener than not a Brahmanical fiction." Those who do not fall into either of these categories are considered 'vaisya' or common folk – the residual category of the Arya community.

In the following centuries, those who were outside the Arya culture, but served the Arya as domestic workers or as farm labourers, were accommodated within the system as low-status 'shudra'. Those who were outside of all four categories, such as the tribes who lived in the forests, were regarded as 'outcastes'. But this fully fleshed-out *varna-jati* system will take time to develop, being dependent on the speed with which agriculture and, therefore, the need to engage non-family labour, took off.

Many things follow from this. One, the caste system did not arise out of a purity-pollution cline; nowhere in the *Rigveda* or other *samhitas* is it suggested that there is a hierarchy of purity among the brahmanas, rajanya and the vis or vaisya. Two, it did not arise out of differences in eating habits; the idea of vegetarianism originated centuries later with the ascetic *sramana* traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism in Greater Magadha, which lies to the east of Aryavarta.

Three, it had little to do with race or ethnicity to begin with; the three *varnas* were all considered Arya. Four, the idea of a *varna* system did not spread from a pre-Aryan or Harappan Civilization. And five, it was not brought to India by the Steppe pastoralists, who called themselves Arya. It was made in India, and ideas such as purity and pollution were justificatory accruals that occurred centuries later.

The trigger for the beginning of the caste system was the need of a victorious kingdom to have a unified religion and a priesthood to administer it. The best model that fits this evidence is that of a universal 'Homo Opportunisticus', and not an Indian 'Homo Hierarchicus' which, according to sociologist Louis Dumont, represents a cultural predilection for hierarchy. Given the opportunity, political and economic man will create a system of belief and along with it, a social system, to perpetuate his status and power.

What began as an embryonic scheme in the *Rigveda* bloomed into a full-fledged system in the later brahmana texts when settled agriculture began to take off. These texts elevated the four-fold hierarchy from the world of mortals to the universe itself. Gods, animals, hymns, seasons, were all mapped into the *varna* system so that, as professor Brian K. Smith wrote in his book *Classifying the Universe* (1994): "...certain humans could present what was an arbitrary social status or status claim as natural and sacred..."

Contest over the meaning of dharma

The next step in the evolution of caste happened in the context of a vigorous resistance to it from the *sramanic* religions. Buddhism and Jainism refused to acknowledge the authority of the *Vedas*, condemned animal sacrifices and accepted into their monastic orders people from all classes. Emperor Asoka's espousal of the cause of '*dhamma*', without mentioning *varna*, queered the pitch further. In response, newly composed *Dharmasutra* and *Dharmasastra* that lay down the rules of conduct for members of the Brahmanical society restated the *varna* ideology with vigour and patterned it into every nook and corner of Arya custom, from the cradle to the pyre. *Manusmriti* (or *Manava Dharmasastra*) was only one of many similar texts written around the beginning of the Common Era.

But when these texts were being written, the *varna* hierarchy was far from commonly accepted. Buddhism, especially, was experiencing the kind of expansion never before seen, riding a wave of prosperity caused by booming trade. But this would change when, between 235 CE and 284 CE, the Roman Empire was hit by a crisis that almost brought it down, the Kusana empire started disintegrating, and world trade was disrupted.

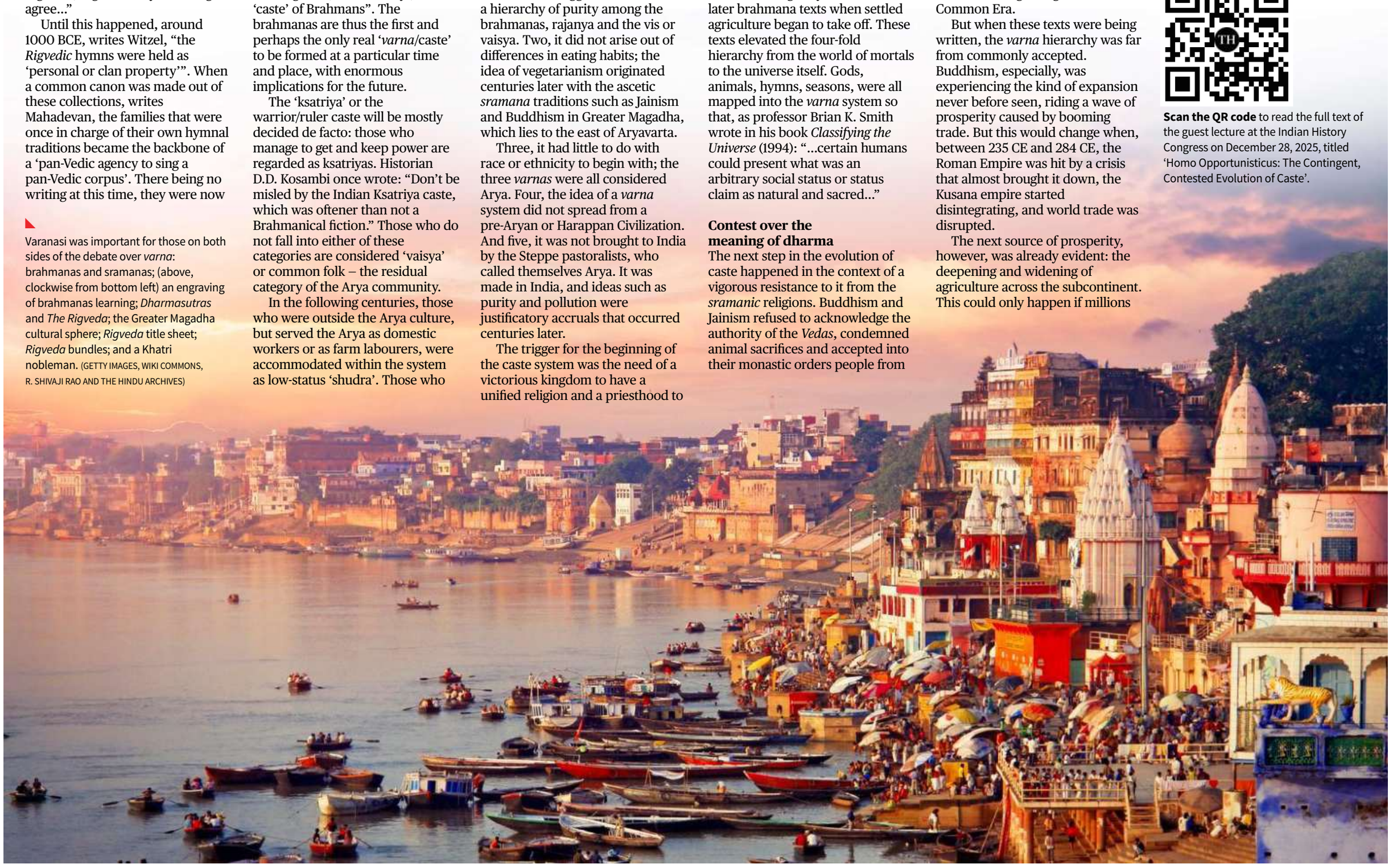
The next source of prosperity, however, was already evident: the deepening and widening of agriculture across the subcontinent. This could only happen if millions of people were drawn into the agricultural system as labourers, especially as farm settlements moved into the lands of forest-dwelling or semi-nomadic groups. And this was a humongous task, which the dozens of new kingdoms that came into being took on eagerly from around the middle of the first millennium CE.

In this task, they found the social framework based on a hereditary hierarchy useful. To implement the new system – and to lend it legitimacy – many kings, including those professing Buddhist or Jaina faith, invited brahmanas from Aryavarta to come and settle in their kingdoms on lands granted to them. Following this, the *varna-jati* system, whose two core principles are (a) an alliance between the ruling and priestly powers, and (b) 'an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt' as Ambedkar put it, spread to the rest of the subcontinent through agro-temple-state formations in the first millennium CE.

This will shape many social attitudes, perhaps leading sociologist Dumont to think up the concept of Homo Hierarchicus in 1966, but without paying attention to the long resistance against it and the way it was shaped by political and economic contingencies. Thirty-five years later, anthropologist Nicholas Dirks would publish another last-mile snapshot of caste in his book *Castes of Mind*, but without paying attention to the step-by-step evolution and geographical expansion of caste.

What we know now is that caste was historically contingent in its origins and socially contested throughout its history and eventually gave rise, in the 20th century, to Ambedkar's call to 'annihilate' it.

The writer, author of Early Indians, *is working on a sequel focusing on India's cultural formation.*

NB: This article does not make a hard distinction between varna *and* jati *because in the ancient texts we are dealing with, there is no indication that the two were treated as different systems.*

Scan the QR code to read the full text of the guest lecture at the Indian History Congress on December 28, 2025, titled 'Homo Opportunisticus: The Contingent, Contested Evolution of Caste'.